

Ageing in transnational contexts: transforming everyday practices and identities in later life

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Ageing in Transnational Contexts: Transforming Everyday Practices and Identities in Later Life

Abstract

This Special Issue on 'Ageing in Transnational Contexts: Transforming Everyday Practices and Identities in Later Life' extends our understanding of how ageing is experienced in transnational contexts. It focuses on how everyday lives and identities in older age are being negotiated by individuals who have migration histories or who are affected by the mobilities of others in their lives. In the introduction we situate our approach within an emerging strand of research investigating the inter-related processes of ageing and transnational migration. We also present the seven empirical case studies that constitute the issue and discuss their collective contribution for the research field.

Key words: ageing, transnationalism, everyday, transnational ageing, everyday practices, older age.

Ageing changes our everyday lives transforming how we understand ourselves, how we view the world and others around us (Gubrium and Holstein 2000, 3). We often need to adapt to a changing body, increasing need for care and negotiate new identities of 'retiree' or stigmatised labels such as the 'old person'. Those of us who are ageing in transnational contexts, either due to our own migration or that of others, need to organize our everyday lives in a setting that is not limited to a single nation state (Horn et al. 2013). International migration and population ageing are thus two processes changing identities and societies around the world. Population ageing, due to decreasing mortality and fertility combined with rising life expectancy, is affecting almost all countries in the world; in both developed and developing countries, the fastest growing age group is people over the age of 60 (UN 2010). Simultaneously, international migration is increasing in volume, diversity, and complexity (Czaika & de Haas 2014). Hence, this Special Issue explores how ageing is experienced in transnational contexts from an everyday life perspective.

This collection is situated within an emerging strand of research investigating the inter-related processes of ageing and transnational migration. Understanding ageing in transnational contexts has received notable interest in the past few years. Only last year, three edited volumes were published on the subject (Horn and Schweppe 2016; Karl and Torres 2016; Walsh and Näre 2016) in addition to a number of published and forthcoming thematic issues (Baldassar et al. 2017; Ciobanu et al. 2017; Ciobanu & Hunter 2017; Horn et al. 2013). This research follows earlier work on ageing and migration that highlighted the interconnections between migration studies and social gerontology (Warnes & Williams 2006). Four streams of research are well established in the existing literature. The first two focus on the primary groups of *retired labour migrants* and *retirement migrants* (Warnes & Williams 2006). Research on these groups, Walsh and Näre (2016, pp. 4-6) argue, has developed into separate sets of literature in spite of some similarities in their experiences. Warnes and Williams (2006) suggest additional groups that complicate this picture, namely ageing labour migrants who return and ageing parents who follow their children's earlier migration. A third research stream examines ageing and older age in the context of

transnational family care, while the fourth investigates the provision of elder care by migrant care workers in private households or care institutions. The articles in this Special Issue on transnational ageing and the everyday, contribute to all four research streams, but demonstrate that rather than being distinctive streams, they are closely interconnected.¹

Perspectives on the everyday

Why an everyday life perspective on ageing and transnational migration? Understanding migrants' everyday lives has been central to migration research since 'Thomas' and Znaniecki's classic work *The Polish Peasant in America* (1918). It is through the study of how people lead their lives, and the meanings they attach to their daily practices, that we can understand transnational migration. However, while there is a rich body of literature on theorizing the everyday,, the 'everyday' is often used without discussing the broader social and political meanings of the concept. Yet, why should we be interested in researching individuals' everyday experiences and practices in the first place, if not for the political potential of everyday lives – as the feminist critique has argued. Separating the everyday from the political sphere overlooks the idea that the everyday can be understood as inherently political. We can take our cue from the classic work by Dorothy E. Smith (1987) on everyday life as problematic, which stresses that the everyday activities of individuals 'are not only concerted in the immediacy of the everyday ... [but] implicated also in the organization of extended social relations or in sequences of socially coordinated action in which many individuals unknown to one another may be active' (Smith 1987, 133). Similarly, the notion of transnationalism from below draws attention to the informal, private and micro worlds of migrants and their transnational networks with the aim of highlighting how important they are to the formal, public and macro contexts that characterize the political economic analyses of migrant lives in which they are so often overlooked (e.g. Gardner & Grillo 2002). Investigating everyday life is thus a means to studying social relations and forms of social organization, in other words, social structures as they present themselves in individuals' everyday lives.

Following these insights, this *Special Issue* argues that an everyday life perspective on ageing in transnational contexts allows us to critically examine how social relations and structures unfold in the experiences of the individuals we study. Everyday life is then not solely about the mundane, it is also where we confront the wider structural questions of inequalities related to socio-economic differences, negotiate access to welfare and care institutions and deal with family and inter-generational relations. It is then as much about meso and macro-level social structures, as it is about the experiences, questions of identity, emotions we attach and the meanings we give to our actions. Hence, we claim that an analysis of everyday lives in the context of transnational ageing touches upon questions of identity, our sense of belonging as well as illuminates structural inequalities. Also, an everyday life perspective allows us to account for the importance of the local context for ageing in transnational settings, including the national welfare, gender and migration regimes, care histories and cultures and ideas about intergenerational responsibility and solidarity (e.g. Baldassar 2008).

The everyday of transnational ageing: perspectives from the articles

The article by Loretta Baldassar, Laura Ferrero and Lucia Portis complicates our discussion of transnational ageing research streams. Their article examines the similarities in everyday experiences of older Italians ageing in their homeland and the younger migrants who are employed to care for them. Despite the power inequalities between employer and employee, these unlikely partnerships have much in common. Both the older Italian care-receivers and the younger migrant care-givers experience loneliness due to their social isolation and nostalgia for the lives they once had and the selves they once were. They are also similarly constrained in their daily choices, each tied to the other without wishing to be. Most care-receivers would prefer to be cared for by family, while most care-givers would rather have employment of a higher status. Using the concepts of care circulation (Baldassar & Merla 2014) and kinning (Howell 2003) the authors report on the largely overlooked experience of shared positive regard that can develop in these relationships and how these impact on the extended kin of both the migrants and their employers. Their analysis highlights how the care-receivers' domestic spaces are transformed into transnational social fields that bring the diaspora worlds of the migrants into the everyday worlds of the locals.

Cati Coe's article also confounds the idea of clear-cut streams in this field. Her study examines how transnational migration from Ghana has contributed to the transformation of eldercare practices and ideals. Transnational migration - alongside other structural changes such as economic growth, increased women's participation in formal employment and population ageing - has instigated a significant social change, the emergence of commercial care services. Drawing on Levitt's concept of social remittances and on an empirical study of ageing clients and their relatives, paid caregivers and the owners of nursing agencies in Ghana, Coe examines how a market for home nursing agencies has been created and sustained by return and current migrants' perceptions of eldercare services as 'Western'. By revealing how commodification of care is taking place in migrant-sending countries also, Coe's study contributes to our understanding on the role of social remittances in everyday lives and changing structures.

Commodification of eldercare is also the topic of the article by Mika Toyota and Leng Leng Thang. They analyse the retirement industry in Southeast Asia from the perspective of Japanese retirees. The authors argue that retirement migration is not only a demographic phenomenon resulting from population ageing and increased mobility, but it is connected to the reconfiguration of political economy and development strategies in the countries investing in the industry. Drawing on the notions of identity negotiations and subject making, the article illuminates the discrepancies between the strategies and subjectivities offered by the retirement industry and the Japanese retirement migrants. While the retirees see themselves as pragmatic individuals who are looking for a low-cost lifestyle in a time of economic uncertainty, the industry perceives them as high-value consumer-subjects. Hence, the article critically unpacks the subjectivity of a retirement migrant as a wealthy lifestyle migrant.

The identities of retirement migrants are also the focus of Minna Zechner's contribution. The analysis of middle-class European and North American retirees' life stories of mobility allows Zechner to closely examine the transnational habitus visible in their narratives. The interviewees construct a story in which international mobility

is central to their identity, but rather than lifestyle factors, their migration is structured by actual transformations, or their anticipation of changes in later life, in respect to familial relations of care, income, healthcare, and personal care needs. Zechner's study challenges the often-assumed bi-focality in the concept of transnational habitus, by demonstrating that when individuals who have led transnational lives retire, they have attachments to various places around the world. Moreover, her article finds that the interviewees desire to continue their mobility after retirement, if not physically at least psychologically, imagining their lives and habitus as transnational.

Also highlighting the reconfiguration of transnational identities through ageing, Ken Chih-Yan Sun's contribution focuses on how relations between parents and their migrant children are reconfigured in later life. Sun employs life history interview narratives to explore the new meanings that elderly parents assign to the dislocation of their transnational families as they negotiate later life, identifying the ambivalence they feel. Many such parents, he argues, were those who strongly encouraged their children to pursue opportunities overseas but, in older age, as this separation becomes extended and risks permanence, they rethink their family situation, narrating a more complex emotional picture, including a sense of loneliness in their own lives. Later life, then, is shown to be a time when the expectations, hopes, and desires brought to familial relations are reconfigured and notions of 'care' come to the forefront.

The exploration of intergenerational and emotional aspects of transnational ageing is also central to Katie Walsh's article, in which she analyses the fictive representation of a changing mother and daughter relationship in *The Bonesetter's Daughter* by Chinese American author Amy Tan. Walsh argues that qualitative studies of migration and ageing have rarely highlighted the emotional aspects of ageing, but that diasporic literature might offer insight into their significance. In terms of the everyday, Walsh focuses on the theoretical lens of 'home', examining the emotional geographies of 'ageing-in-place' (Warnes and Williams 2006) and the transnationality of home in older age for the first-generation Chinese-American Luling, the mother character at the heart of Tan's book. The novel narrates everyday experiences of ageing from the perspectives of Luling and her daughter Ruth, including her decision-making in respect to parent-care. Walsh argues that Tan's tale resonates universally with certain aspects of bodily ageing, while also highlighting cultural norms and sensitivities among a US-minority community. In the text, the practice of storytelling is prompted by older age allowing Tan to present an empowering commentary on the role of the older generation in becoming a transformative force in their children's efforts to navigate belonging.

Belonging is a central theme also in Näre's article on ageing Gujaratis in London. Drawing on life story narratives of older age Gujaratis and their adult children who are ageing in transnational fields encompassing North London, India and East Africa, the article emphasizes how Gujaratis need to re-negotiate their sense of belonging in the context of ageing. The article reveals that ageing Gujaratis have to change their annual rhythm of spending winters in India or in East Africa and summers in the UK due to the constraints that the ageing body sets to physical mobility across continents, but also due to restrictions in the national health care system that demands regular presence in the UK. Moreover, and similarly to Sun's, also Näre's study points to

ambivalences that emerge from the narratives of ageing Gujaratis, when racialised and patriarchal social structures clash with individuals' need for integrity, freedom and belonging. Questions of identity are by no means 'resolved' in older age but need to be negotiated in relation to the social relations that structure everyday lives.

Transnational ageing and the everyday

Providing a diverse selection of global empirical case studies, the articles in this Special Issue are revealing of ageing in varied transnational contexts. Together they make a marked contribution to the growing interdisciplinary sub-field of ageing and migration through their collective attention to the everyday. Each article highlights the everyday in different ways, as described above, yet there are several thematics which emerge strongly in this collection and help us to assert the following observations and agenda for further study.

While the study of migrant identities is a familiar part of attending to 'the everyday' in Migration Studies (e.g. Conradson and Latham 2005), the practices of ageing that constitute and intersect with such identifications, as well as the changing narratives of belonging that older age may engender, have been relatively neglected in this interdisciplinary turn. In this issue, ageing is made central to the analyses of identities and, as such, it becomes apparent how ageing processes impact variably on identity construction, changing people's values, needs, desires, and subjectivities, as well as the way in which they articulate these, always in contexts that are both structured by social forces such as social class, ethnicity and gender. Life story and narrative interview methodologies are shown to be especially helpful in exploring the transformations associated with ageing, perhaps since they afford people a reflective space in which they can themselves describe the changes they have experienced or anticipate (Baldassar et al, Näre, Sun, Zechner). The intersections of gender with generation are also evident in some of the articles (Baldassar et al, Näre, Walsh), but further analysis would clearly be beneficial to develop a deeper understanding of how transnational spaces and practices are gendered.

Several articles highlight the emotional subjectivities of transnational ageing in later life by examining the transformation of belonging and home (Näre, Sun, Walsh) and the embodied experience of corporeal ageing (Näre, Walsh) and elderly care (Baldassar et al., Toyota and Thang, Coe). Existing accounts of transnational practices and identities associated with ageing have largely been devoid of any explicit discussion of emotion, so a turn towards the everyday is significant in this regard and could be taken further.

In Migration Studies, a transnational optic has long been established as an important way of re-imagining the spatialities of everyday practices and, for Boccagni (2012), it is a 'theoretical toolkit' that is especially salient for examining everyday life. The important work of Lamb (2002) and others (e.g. Baldassar et al. 2017; Gardner 2002) has already firmly established the necessity of adopting a transnational lens for exploring how practices and cultures of ageing are being reconfigured across time and space, and the articles in this issue help to further explore these transformations. Across this collection our attention is drawn towards transnational practices, imaginaries, families, cultures, and identities, rather than a focus on individual cross-border movements. Thereby,

the articles jointly call for a rethinking of how transnationalism as a social process transforms everyday lives and identities in older age, not only for those who have migrated, by creating, for example: transnational and diasporic spaces in homes (Baldassar et al.); specific ways of being in the world or transnational habitus (Zechner); new imaginaries, ambivalences and belongings (Näre; Sun; Walsh); changing intergenerational relations (Näre, Sun, Baldassar et al.) and cultures of care (Coe; Toyota & Thang). All of these approaches highlight the connections between the micro-, meso- and macro-levels, the everyday as implicated in the wider social and political worlds.

A significant dimension of recent debates in transnationalism has been the recognition of the *embeddedness* of transnational practices that constitute the everyday (Boccagni 2012). Certainly, looking at the everyday practices of transnationalism from the perspective of older age reveals the importance of materiality in transnational research – both in the sense of embodiment and resources. The articles in this issue are then a reminder that transnational everyday practices do not constitute immaterial ‘flows’ but are restricted and limited by the (dis)abilities and capacities of the bodies involved in them, and by the material resources individuals have at their disposal. As a result, engaging with transnational practices and imaginaries in later life is differentiated among older people and requires further analysis as migration processes diversify and intensify across the globe.

Notes

1. This Special Issue is one of the outcomes of a European Science Foundation – funded Exploratory Workshop ‘Rethinking Older Age: Transnational Migration, Home and Cultures of Care’ (EW 11-223) which Näre and Walsh convened at the University of Helsinki in August 2012. We are grateful to all the hard work the contributors, the reviewers, the Editors and the Journal Manager of *Identities* have put into this issue.
2. In addition to the established research strands Torres and Karl (2016, p. 6) mention also demographic studies of migration and ageing societies from the perspective of the population structure as a fifth stream.

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